

PARENTS, CHILDREN, AND GRANDCHILDREN

did not eat deer's meat, or his brother-in-law the meat of the bush-hog.

There are many kinds of tchina. There are the obia tchina. A man wearing or carrying with him a charm—an obia—will have several prohibitions imposed on him. If these are observed, the potency of the magic in the object gives him will remain, but if they are violated, it will become a worthless ornament. When an obia is bought, its maker will take the hands of the man for whom he has made it in his, and pass his own lightly over them, blowing softly, so that the power of the spirit he had called upon when making it may enter into the man for whom the obia was made. Then the obia man will lean over and whisper, that no one might overhear, "When you wear this, do not get into a boat backwards," or, perhaps, "Never eat crab meat while you have this about your neck," or "Do not eat cassava and rice out of the same calabash."

But with the personal tchina it is otherwise. At birth each individual falls heir to a number of taboos. They come to him from his father. When a woman is with child she observes her husband's taboos as well as her own, for the child might otherwise be harmed in the womb by being nurtured on what is hateful to his father, and therefore to himself, since his father's taboos are his own. Male and female children take these tchina from the father. Their mother's tchina are no concern of theirs. Those which she observes had come to her from her own father. What makes the father ill will make the children ill, too. This holds for their entire lives, and the male children transmit their tchina from generation to generation.

A simple instance of this is the one which happened at our base camp when Bayo, who we knew could not eat out of a cooking pot, came one day to ask us for a dish. "My father forgot his eating dish. Will you let him use one of yours? He cannot eat out of a cooking pot."

When one man says of another, therefore, "He has the same tchina I have," he is saying that the two of them are related in the father's line.

WOMEN AT WORK

which went on, so that she might recount it to her father. The women of the village walked "softly" with this older daughter. "Daughter of the Gamas," they called her when they addressed her, and her mildly spoken, persuasive suggestions were never ignored. 64A

Wilhelmina, however, busied herself at her work, and if anything were asked of her, she would look up with an expression of bewilderment. Differing from other women of the village, who had come to live there after marriage and knew the speech of the less aristocratic down-river settlements, Wilhelmina had never been any distance from Aandopo Lantiwe. The other women were, therefore, constantly interpreting the questions which were being put to her.

She was dark of skin, as dark as her sister, but her face had a flush of red in it, as though she had brushed it with the sacred red kuswe. A little above her wrists gleamed wide bands of tin. These were bracelets her husband had made for her, and they were much prized. The brass coils which she once wore had been filed through and removed, for when the ankles of a woman who bore children swelled, it became necessary to be rid of these ornaments. [142]
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In a small mortar, decorated with carvings, she was pounding maripa nuts. The ends of the pestle were bordered with finely cut cross hatchings. [352]
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"Ai, we use much palm oil here," she said.

Her mother was paring cassava. At her feet were several baskets and pieces of bark, shaped like miniature canoes, into which she threw the peeled cassava. Near these containers lay a sifter, woven of palm fiber, and a grater, made of a thin board perhaps sixteen inches long and half as wide, into which long slender nails had been hammered and their points filed to a needle-like sharpness. When the tubers were peeled, Wilhelmina began the grating, first squatting down, then dropping to her knees, better to work. The grated cassava was then packed into the matapi, the cassava press which had before leaned against the house. This matapi was of a basket-like weave, golden in color 64A
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REBEL DESTINY

765 And Feneconde said, "Mourning is hard. The widow must not go to the river alone to wash. Other women must take her there. Her husband's spirit might seize her. Her hair must be cut. If not, he will get her by the hair. Her clothes must be ugly. She must keep herself unclean, so that his ghost will not long for her when he sees her."

But mourning was difficult not only for a woman. A man's mourning period was no less burdensome, they added. He too wore old clothes. When he went to wash, his wife's brother took him to the river. If he had another wife, he did not go into the hammock with her, for the dead woman would be envious and would kill him.

765 There were times, however, when women did not go into mourning for their husbands. If a woman carried a child in her womb, then she did not put on mourning clothes at all. She did not weep, she was not allowed to show any grief. That same night the dead man's oldest living brother would come with her in the hammock. If there were no brother, another man would come, for some man had to come.

"He must come. It cannot be otherwise. She cannot go to her hammock alone. So it is every night when a woman carries a child in her womb. A man must be with her, for the sake of the child."

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243 In the clearing the widow stood stamping rice. About her the rice hulls flew and made a half circle of gold at her dark feet. Her mortar, which was made of a hollowed-out log, like a drum, was large and reached almost to her hips. On the ground was a large tray which she used for winnowing the rice. With slow, regular beats she lifted and dropped the pestle, and as her body swung with its slow motion the head of the sleeping child on her back rolled this way and that.

243 Her two small boys had gone to live in her mother's village, but this girl child remained with her. She was born

WOMEN AT WORK

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Tenemi made ready to carve a calabash dish. She sat down on her work stool, and on the ground beside her she put down a small knife, a piece of broken glass, and half of a calabash shell. The inner pulp had just been removed, and both the inside and outside of the gourd were of a pale green color. She had dipped it in water before she brought it here, and now with the point of her knife she deftly marked her design. The curves in the center, covering almost the entire inner surface, formed the body of a woman, she said, who was big with child. The geometric tracings in parallel narrow lines across one portion of the top was the Ahoma snake, euphemistically called the G'an Tetel, the great creeper, or vine. Taking up the piece of glass, she began to scrape away carefully the soft pulp inside the outlines of her design.

In the entire village there was no woman who worked faster at carving calabash dishes than did Tenemi. In less than half an hour the dish was ready to be placed on the high platform where the maripa nuts were drying. With the sun upon it, the calabash would turn a deep cream color, but where the knife had borne down, it would show a golden brown, and where the glass had scraped away the pulp, the color would be a paler gold, so pale that it would be almost the cream of the unornamented outer surface.

"The large closed gourds are not done fast. These are carved on the outside, and must be worked cleverly. But this does not take long. I am making this for you. When it is finished I will bring it to you. You must give it to your girl-child when she grows big."

She herself had made four children, but only two of them were living. The oldest, a daughter, carried a child in her womb. Tomorrow she would come to the village, and Tenemi would bring her.

"She was afraid to come. Women who are with child must be very careful."

REBEL DESTINY

84 It appeared that nothing in a woman's life was so dreaded
85 as childbearing, nothing more coveted than fertility, and no
time so difficult and so anxious as when a woman was
rearing her children.

86 "The day before a girl marries she prays all day to her
87 gods," said Dida, who with Fenehonde and several other
women had joined us. "I begged my god Keskia and gave
him rice and rum. All day they played the agida. I begged
him not to hate my husband. I begged him to give us
children."

88 When a woman conceived, her husband made her many
89 obias, and especially a black sack obia with four cowries
90 sewed on it, to keep her safe on the paths which led from
91 village to village, and from village to her field. The fear
92 of the power of bad magic at this time was so great that,
93 if we but looked at one of the pregnant women, or let our
94 eyes rest on the several obias she wore, she grew nervous,
95 covered them with both her hands, and disappeared in
96 fear that the very power of our glance might weaken the
97 potency of the charms. She did not believe in the white
98 man's magic, but she was not in a condition to wish to put
99 it to a test.

100 "When her time comes, a woman sees to it that she is in
101 her own village," said Fenehonde. "It is not good to give
102 birth in the bush, or on the river."

This had almost happened to Wilhelmina with her last
child. She was on the river alone in a boat. Chief Sungi
of Dahomey met her and called on his gods to delay the
coming of the child until he brought her home. He had
strong obia, and so the misfortune was averted.

When the woman felt the first labor-pains, she prayed to
the gods, and to her personal spirits. On the great Sky God
she called, and the Earth Mother; on her ak'a, her soul;
on the Yorba, the ancestors; and then she prayed to her
personal gods, and particularly to whatever snake gods
she might have, for some of these were known to be jealous
of a coming child. But none of the gods dared be slighted.

BAYO, THE PLAYBOY

"Will Bayo be married before we leave the bush?" we asked, telling her that only a short time would see us returning to our own country. 115

We had often talked of marriage with Bayo on our trip up river and had offered to make up what he lacked in gifts and money that we might witness the festivities of marriage. He had, of course, promised to have matters arranged.

Bayo's aunt laughed, however, when she heard the question, and turned to the other woman who was with us in the dimly lighted hut.

"Did you hear what the white man asks?" she called out to her companion. "White man, let me tell you something. Bayo is a long way from marrying yet. Why, his girl's breasts haven't begun to come yet!" 584 115

It seemed that Bayo had also to see to many things before he could marry. He had not yet cut the field for his mother-in-law, nor had he made any of the carvings which he needed to give his betrothed and her mother, for Bayo was a poor carver.

"Bayo has cunning in his eyes, and his head, but his fingers have no cunning, Bak'a. . . . But you know this, Bayo is strong." 115

Her train of thought turned at the last phrase to our journey up river. Had we traveled well with Bayo? Had he got on with the other men? Awa, she knew that people liked him. It was the obia he had, and his own gods, but his gods were bad, too.

"When he was in his mother's womb, he troubled her much. He tore at her. Ai, she had no happy time of it with Bayo." (843) •

We remembered the incest kunu in Bayo's family, which lay in wait for all its members, killing off one by one until the line was wiped out. We ventured a cautious question. 684 776

"You are the sister of Bayo's mother?"

The answer, however, did not take us to kunu, but rather to the iron on her arm. 115 776

"Ai, and of his father who is now dead. In our family we have strong gods. It is these that have come to Bayo. . . ." 789

- 778 carvings. Still another magic device is a red necklace of macaw feathers, to bring luck in hunting. Another obeiah with
- [843] a tinkling bell is worn around the neck by pregnant women to tell the unborn child that everything is auspicious in the outside world.

Some of the beliefs accompanying these amulets are odd

[774] and child-like. The Djukas think that spirits are afraid of strangers, and flee in terror when a stranger is encountered. The inhabitants of the little town of *Pekein Say* (Talk a Little Bit) have the power to call back hunters who are lost in the bush, a virtue peculiar to these townfolk alone. These curious beliefs persist despite the fact that they could easily be tested and exposed. Any coincidence will strongly reinforce them. Late one evening, going up the river, we came to an Aucaner village and stopped to spend the night. Not liking the looks of the place we told our paddlers to push on to the next village before night. Tired, they grumbled at this. To give weight to our decision we told the blacks that our obeiahs were warning us not to stay, and that it would be dangerous to let this warning pass unheeded. Impressed with the gravity of the warning, they acceded to our wishes. We went on, although not being able to reach the adjacent village in time we were forced to spend the night in the bush.

Later, coming back down the river, we learned that the village we had passed by had held, on that very night, a great and disastrous dance. There had been much drinking of high

[579
731] wine, and, in the drunken and hysterical excitement that followed, half the town was burned down and three men were killed.

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CHAPTER VI

FAMILY CUSTOM

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105 The family custom of the Refugee Blacks presents more unity than their beliefs. Contrary to the Blacks of Brazil and Haiti, among whom the influences of Dahomey and the Yoruba country have dominated, the Refugee Blacks of Guiana have borrowed the essential part of their family custom from the Agni-Ashanti culture area. One finds again especially such characteristic traits as the prohibition of inheritance of widows, customs relating to birth, isolation of the dead in cemeteries away from habitations.

But on several essential points:

- The marriage system.
- Institutions relative to death and mourning, and the central place given to them in the whole body of customary institutions.

The Refugee Blacks have separated themselves cleanly from the conceptions of their ancestors, and the conceptions they have elaborated may be in large measure considered as an original creation.

Birth

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Beliefs. As soon as a woman is pregnant, her husband is subject to special obligations. He may not use a shovel nor drive nails. These operations which, among the Refugee Blacks, have as their primary purpose the digging of graves and the making of coffins, might be supposed to make the child die. Neither he nor his wife may cut their hair; he is subject to food interdictions, especially the maïpouri (tapir).

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[827] Sexual relations continue during the whole pregnancy, for they are reputed to be indispensable for the formation of the mind of the child, which is thought to come from the father; also, for a man whose wife is pregnant there can be no question of abandoning her nor even of leaving for a long trip without the permission of the head of her lineage.

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789 Forecasting of the birth. Divinatory rituals are carried out from the first months of pregnancy to forecast whether the childbirth will be easy or not. For that one goes to an old man who "knows" one of these remedies. There are several: one consists in making a small hole in the center of a cross outlined on the ground, pouring into it a decoction of magic herbs kept secret, and putting an egg into it. The remedy-master then says: "If the childbirth is to be easy, the egg must be crushed as soon as my foot bears down /122/ on it." They state that sometimes the egg resists crushing: from this they deduce that the delivery will be difficult.

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[789] When the time for delivery arrives, concern is centered on the danger of maleficent human entities, ɔgi sani, which try to become incarnate in the child. The woman is shut up in the house, all of its exits are blocked off, and ɔbiaman are called to perform rites of protection all around the house. If [845] delivery is difficult, that is attributed to the fact that one of these entities succeeded in getting into the house in spite of the precautions taken.

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602 The ɔbiaman are called to "wash" the woman with the help of appropriate remedies.. Only in serious cases are men allowed to enter the house. As a general rule, during the first eight days only women related to the mother may enter. (Care is even taken as far as possible to get as midwife (mena) an old woman related to the mother.)

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765 Before coming out of mourning, the widow must procure
431 for herself at the minimum the money necessary for a demijohn
[606] of tafia as a contribution to the festival of the lifting of mourn-
ing. She must make a present of several cans of couac to her
husband's mother.

765 A pregnant woman undergoes mourning exactly according
843 to the general law. The custom described by several authors
184 for the Saramaka, according to which the pregnant woman must
join one of her husband's "brothers," does not apply to the Boni.

765 There are some attenuations of the harshness of mourning
888 with respect to old women. For example in 1956, Lémiki
(70 years), living in Boniville, was in mourning for her husband
Tabiki (Awara Bakka, but residing since childhood with the
Lapé lineage in Loka /180/ where he had been raised by his
[768] father). Lémiki alternately spent three weeks in her house and
[602] three in her husband's. It was Asamani, Tabiki's sister by the
same father, who exercised authority over her.

765 This remarkable example shows that as regards mourning
768 (rights and duties), the principle of residence plays an essential
[613] role. He who has been reared by his father is in this respect
taken out of his lineage, which loses all rights and all control
over the conduct of the mourning.

765 The co-wives of a widower are subject to mourning on
[775] the same grounds as he, and for the same motive, since they
are targets for the jealousy of the dead woman's yɔfka.

[768] However, they are authorized most often to live with their
maternal family. When the period of dipi baaka has ended,
765 they may take up conjugal relations again with their husband,
833 but at intervals of several weeks and without his being able to
spend the night with one of them. Each time he must ask per-
[613] mission of the head of the dead woman's lineage.